



Forging a Learning Community?

A pragmatic approach to co-operative learning

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abstract

The 'learning community' is an important theme within the move to an information age. This article argues that the empowering elements of such communities are fundamental to higher education. However, a better understanding of what they entail is required by teachers. The author reflects upon current thinking about collaborative learning and communities of practice, and highlights how user-involvement in curriculum design and delivery can promote fuller engagement with the learning process. The findings of a three-year Higher Education Funding Council for England-funded initiative to implement and evaluate online teaching/learning in humanities and arts departments are analysed in order to illustrate the possibilities for learning and teaching innovation that learning communities can offer.

keywords *collaborative; learning community; networks; participation*

introduction

IN THE MOVE towards an information age, a discourse of 'learning communities' has been a central theme. Such communities are defined and energized by a desired learning outcome or a need that is shared, and a process or set of procedures by which that outcome can be achieved. The community is focused by its participants' individual and mutual engagement with a specific problem. Its effectiveness hinges on alignment of the individual participants' motivations and actions towards a particular end, and their willingness to immerse themselves within a broader, collective culture that promotes achievement of it. This involves negotiating and establishing shared norms and values, and procedures and methods of working together. What then becomes

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important is framing appropriate contributions by individuals to the larger community (Wenger, 1998).

In the context of higher education, Collis and Moonen (2001) note that the roles of students and tutors will alter over time as they become such co-contributors to a learning community. McConnell agrees, adding 'if the community is working as a learning community (sharing, supporting, challenging, critiquing, questioning, etc.) learners will constantly be faced with working at deep levels' (McConnell, 1994: 93). One way in which collective action has been energized in recent times is through appropriate online approaches to learning and teaching. The role of the web and the communicative cultures that it supports tend to shape the ways in which participants gain a sense of identity and legitimacy as learners. So, for several authors (Fenwick, 2001; Kenway, 2001; New, 2000) web-enhanced learning and teaching practices raise the question: can a democratic and empowering community truly evolve within these settings? And, who is being empowered within such a community?

This article examines the impact of the web on our understanding of learning communities. It utilizes data from the Courseware for History Implementation Consortium (*Chic*), a three-year project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that evaluated appropriate uses of web-based learning and teaching, and asks whether a sense of community involvement was supported by the departmental innovations the project promoted. This analysis underpins an examination of whether one can align the positive aspects of a learning community with the pragmatic needs of learning and teaching in higher education. It is argued that in order to make learning more meaningful, educators need an appropriate understanding of learning communities and to work towards partnership with their students.

collaborative learning

Web-based learning has opened up possibilities for individual and collective educational benefit through the powerful effects of sharing information and of shared knowledge-generation (Hereen and Lewis, 1997; Jones, 1995; McConnell, 1994). Collis and Moonen (2001: 2) note that 'participation in and contribution to a professional community' is a fundamental element of 21st-century digital working. The web has amplified an already strong educational case for the provision of collaborative learning environments that empower the individual (Biggs, 1999; Wenger, 1998). This notion of 'empowerment' underpins a liberal, often ideologically driven, socio-economic approach to co-operative learning and its alleged community-based benefits. The Dearing

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report into UK higher education, for example, highlighted the belief that 'a democratic and civil society has an awareness of multiple perspectives through collaboration and critical reflection' (NCIHE, 1997: 79). And the current UK government (DfES, 2001) has begun to stress the importance of citizenship and community learning through personal involvement and service, which it sees as adding economic value.

Two aspects of this discussion of individual and collective empowerment through collaborative learning are particularly important. The first is the question of motivation: why might an individual want to engage with others? ('What's in it for me?') Ecclestone (1999: 344) has noted that 'There is a problem in that extrinsic motivation and self-interest [are] more important to learners than education as a socially transforming process – students tend to lower their horizons and engage minimally. This is underpinned by a "minimalist pedagogy"'. To move beyond this, it is argued, learners need to be engaged by their educators in a sympathetic and symbiotic network. The second aspect concerns the very nature of empowerment. As Fenwick (2001: 75) puts it, 'Questions as to whose empowerment and to what ends are not asked'. A critical issue here is the tension that may well exist between an individual's beliefs and actions, and those of the community or institution within which s/he works. Can such tension be resolved in a mutually satisfactory way, or does belonging to a community tend to divest individuals of their individuality? Of major importance, then, is to what extent group processes and tasks can promote learners' willing engagement. Can technologies of communication be harnessed to this end?

the power of community?

If educators are to promote a sense of belonging within a course of study then they need to start by recognizing that individual students exist within varied and variously overlapping contexts. So key to such promotion is the ability to generate meaningful learning opportunities for all, and to identify learning outcomes that can best be achieved by mutual interaction. Sacks (2000) makes the central point that people come together in communities to achieve collectively what they cannot as individuals. In this view, communities are diverse and involving, rather than being limited to people who have similar backgrounds or lifestyles. Equally, communities are therapeutic for both individuals and the group because diversity is accepted in the shared pursuit of specified outcomes. Enabling trust through communication is fundamental in this process.

More radical educational thinkers have acknowledged that any community can be deconstructed to reveal plural and also conflicting interests, which

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generate a rich understanding of power relationships and processes such as marginalization, and allow us to embrace difference (Frière, 1972; Haber, 1994). Haber argued that 'the question of the legitimacy of a subject position is important for self-identification and therefore empowerment' (1994: 113). Promoting learner empowerment requires the recognition that production and dissemination of non-academic information, understandings and values may have as much worth as traditional academic practices. Thus, accepting that various modes of analysis can generate legitimate knowledge is fundamentally important in higher education learning communities (Barnett, 2000).

Some of the features of communities, which give them their power, are regarded as defining by these writers. Firstly, they are moral networks: they are open and democratic, with the members sharing responsibilities and rights, and they operate within accepting and accepted parameters. Secondly, they recognize that learning is a communal activity: that the whole is enhanced through development of the individual. Thirdly, as we have seen, they accept the value of non-academic knowledges: that individual experience and commentary may have equal worth with academic knowledge and can also be critiqued, in an appropriately non-judgemental manner. Fourthly, these communities take a pragmatic view of engagement, using whatever approaches are relevant and meaningful to the task-in-hand. Where the *modus operandi* is negotiated with learners and related to the learning outcomes being pursued, it becomes individually and collectively appropriate. This moves educators and learners away from ideologically- or structurally-charged thinking towards the creation of symbiotic networks or webs of belonging. Illich (1971: vii) understood this in terms of educational webs 'which heighten the opportunity for each one [person] to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing and caring'.

Finally, in terms of Games Theory, while these communities have zero-sum (win-lose or fixed outcome) elements, they are essentially made up of non-zero-sum (win-win or variable) interactions. Thus, they emphasize positive outcomes, in which both individual and community interests are enhanced. It is vital to their success that there is shared acceptance of 'I win therefore we win' (rather than 'you win, therefore I lose') attitudes to the collaborative goal, although the final outcome may be better for some than for others (Wright, 2000). As with other models for mapping group action, an analysis based upon Games Theory inevitably focuses on the notion of trust, which requires individual engagement in a collective existence. But the question is, can a pragmatic *modus operandi* be developed which enables learners to trust the systems and norms that emerge and then engage with them?

*Hall: Forging a Learning Community?*figure 1 *Anstein's ladder of citizen participation*

8	Citizen control	Degrees of citizen power
7	Delegated power	
6	Partnership	
5	Placation	Degrees of tokenism
4	Consultation	
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	Non-participation
1	Manipulation	

participation within a learning community:
anstein and wenger

In the context of citizen participation, forging solidarity between individuals allows meaningful community action to be undertaken. For instance, Towers (1995: 172) argued that participation is vital in community architecture projects: 'The involvement of the people affected by [a] development in taking decisions about their own environment' ensures that the projects matter to the people they affect. Decision-making through discussion is the central process of such participation. A model of what constitutes meaningful citizen participation was developed by Anstein (1971). She examined the extent to which public involvement in community architecture projects was largely a means of manipulating opinion and, in the process, developed an eight-stage ladder of participation (see Figure 1).

As individuals and groups move up the ladder they become better able to take control of their own lives, through engagement in agreed activity moving beyond critique of their environment towards action within it. However, not only is such participation predicated upon the motivation of the individual citizen and the group, it also depends upon the extent to which professionals are willing to give up some of their decision-making power.

In educational contexts, there is clearly a cultural overhead involved in developing partnerships of this kind, which impact upon both individual motivation and curriculum design. Wenger (1998) sees the process as one of

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developing a 'community of practice'. He believes that education should be concerned primarily with development of appropriate identities and modes of belonging, and only then with the acquisition of skills and information. This view encourages us to consider educational designs not just as techniques for supporting the construction of knowledge, but more generally in terms of their effects on the formation of identity. Thus, he argues, students need:

- 1 places of engagement (learning spaces);
- 2 materials and experiences (learning tasks) with which to build an identity; and
- 3 ways of making their actions matter (learning partnerships).

And Wenger's model has further ramifications: protecting time for individuals to create student identities; overcoming minimalist involvement on their part; managing courses in which the loci of power are distributed. Thus, innovative educational practice – forging learning communities – has a broad cultural impact on programmes of study, academic departments and institutions.

Just as in Anstein's citizen-participation model, Wenger's community of practice entails that the student-participants take ever more control over their learning, through engagement in agreed activity, and it implies a shift in traditional power relations between teacher and students. While the time scale of an educational course that is student-led may be the same as one that is tutor-led, communication is often more intense, difficult and time-consuming. Teachers' commitments, both in terms of time and of managing course delivery, will alter as students take more control for themselves. Crucially, this affects power relationships and working cultures within courses and departments. Teachers may see such change as a threat, as a loss of the power and control traditionally theirs. They may need to be convinced that fuller participation by students in course design and delivery can have outcomes that are beneficial to all concerned. A way in which successful achievement of a learning community can be tested is precisely by evaluating its approach to partnership: assessing the ways in which the participants can express themselves and act. Anstein and Wenger both highlight the need for places of engagement, linked to specific tasks that focus people's interactions. In education, places of engagement (learning spaces), learning tasks and outcomes need to be aligned and directly linked to assessment, in order to stimulate the students' motivation to participate.

In sum, for collaboration to be meaningful, well-motivated individuals need to participate in teamwork underpinned by trust. The learning community revolves around active participation; engagement in a shared task, negotiated pragmatically, which in turn depends upon peer-groups having access to the necessary learning resources. If all these things are supported,

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learning communities can flourish. However, the extent to which such participation is promoted by institutional cultures is debatable. One of the outcomes of the *Chic* Project was analysis of the possible development of a more collaborative and empowering culture. The rest of this article concerns an evaluation of that project's approaches to curriculum design and cultural change, and the ways in which these impact upon the development of 'learning communities'.

the *CHIC* project: the development of
collaborative working

The *Chic* project ran from August 1998 to July 2001. It focused on effective integration of online student support and learning materials in mainstream humanities and arts curricula. The project's remit was to evaluate the implementation of web-enhanced teaching/learning processes, and the quality of student learning that resulted, in 14 departments of History across the UK as well as departments of Design, English, Health, and Religious Studies. In all, the evaluation directly involved over 1500 students and 75 academic, management and support staff in the universities.

The project developed and tested hypotheses about the relationship between curriculum innovation, stated learning outcomes, and assessment procedures. A flexible approach to curriculum design was developed that involved the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs), in various ways, as media of course delivery. For instance, 10 departments developed websites that linked pastoral student support materials (such as ICT helpdesks, course news items and general bulletin boards) to learning materials and activities. The hypothesis was that such sites would produce a holistic learning experience, which would promote co-operation among students and their involvement in the course. A tutor wanted to promote this process because 'I was anxious to focus contact (and non-contact) time, with classes getting bigger, to avoid the multiplication of seminars. I was also anxious . . . to give the students a more interactive role in the learning process'.¹

In order to understand whether the outcomes of such innovations demonstrated that communities of practice were indeed forged, it was crucial that appropriate evaluation was undertaken. The arguments presented in what follows have emerged from triangulation of the following data sets:

- 1 pre and post-implementation questionnaires with staff and students;
- 2 post-implementation interviews with staff and students;
- 3 focus group sessions, run at regular intervals throughout the implementations with students at four institutions;

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- 4 project reports, which analysed implementations and gave recommendations for action;
- 5 departmental implementation plans which detailed short and medium-term innovation; and
- 6 an analysis of the language contained in departmental websites as public statements of institutional culture and expectations.

Evidence was collected over the life cycle of the project's implementations in order to map the learning process that each innovation supported and iterate the educational provision.

Across all the departments involved, Toohey's (1999) key curriculum design issue was addressed: 'what is most important for these students to know and what might be the best ways for them to learn it?' Exactly how this question is addressed reveals the cultural approach taken to learning and teaching within a course or programme, and the interpretation made of 'learning community'. By examining student and tutor reactions to learning and teaching processes it is possible to move away from a tutor-centred, knowledge-based pedagogic framework. In five of the departments a greater sense of collaborative working was indeed developed, and the foundations for an engaging learning community were created, by linking explicitly negotiated learning processes to certain teaching media.

A learning culture

In laying the foundations for a community of learning, it was vital to affect the attitudes of all those involved. In these five departments, more effective collaborative working was the aim from the outset. In one of them, for 24 level two students of a Special Subject module, achievement of the learning outcomes was facilitated by online, group-based task work, housed within a virtual learning environment (WebCT) and specifically tied in to face-to-face working practices. The complementary relationship between online and face-to-face elements was articulated by the tutor from the start, so that the students could appreciate the holistic nature of the course design and the alignment between course delivery methods, learning outcomes and assessment.

A most important element of the course was induction. The tutor spent the first three-hour session facilitating a discussion about learning styles and the intrinsic value of collaborative working. However, he noticed 'immediate practical problems of not only enhancing interaction with the learning materials but promoting reflective interaction among and between the learners themselves'. In part, tensions were created by the non-traditional methods of the course, which clashed with those the students experienced in other courses.

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For the tutor, the working parameters of the new learning environment were of the first importance, so managing the following issues was crucial in moving the students forward, towards becoming full partners in the learning process:

- 1 the composition and size of the group (the 24 students were divided into four smaller online groups);
- 2 the reliability of the innovation and its delivery, and equality of access to it;
- 3 training and ongoing support for students;
- 4 the links between contact (face-to-face) and non-contact (online) time and activities;
- 5 the tutor's approach to e-moderating and active participation; and,
- 6 the relationship between learning spaces, tasks and assessment.

While the tutor acknowledged that there were 'weak group dynamics at the start and a lack of familiarity with hypothesis-building', over time he saw 'a growing recognition of what could be achieved through collaborative effort'. Individual empowerment was enhanced by collective strategies nested in a co-operative, or non-zero-sum, culture. This allowed the students to create what Laurillard (1993) calls a 'conversational framework' among themselves, and with their tutor and the learning resources. It was crucial that the students were aware of the way in which the learning outcomes of the course were aligned to assessment through co-operative learning tasks. The tasks themselves, supported across clearly demarcated learning spaces, were pivotal.

Development of the learning community depended upon the expectations of tutor and students being negotiated and agreed. This included accepting individuals' needs and giving space for identities to be defined. Maintaining the community involved weekly face-to-face meetings with each of the four online student groups for the purposes of evaluating ideas that had emerged during previous online exchanges, resolving issues, raising new problems, and providing a basis for moving the group forward to the next study task. The course evaluations illustrated that the 'students agreed that the group seminars served as the anchor point of the course'. Over time, they allowed individual expectations to be tied to group needs and enabled each participant to feel that his/her experiences and beliefs could be valued. Thus, for a sense of engagement to be developed over time it had to be promoted actively by the tutor.

This was mirrored at another site, where a first-year design course used discussion groups within the Blackboard learning environment to analyse perceptions of particular images. At first, one student felt that 'all [the] work was done on your own, [there was] no conversing or opinions'. Despite this,

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the main benefit of the innovation was thought to be that the students could work at their own pace and have greater opportunity to formulate their individual (written) responses to the group. One said, 'I liked the fact that I didn't feel pressured when answering the questions', and three students used the phrase 'talking with confidence' to describe their experience of taking part. The tutor emphasized the value of peer-learning and 'Being able to read and respond to other people's answers' throughout the module. Five students who were initially reticent agreed, noting that 'interaction with other people's comments' and 'being able to find out how others think' had motivated them to participate. However, the tutor remarked on the need to nudge learners away from responding to questions and interacting with him alone. He noted that 'A cultural shift is needed to engender a greater degree of discussion between student peers rather than simply between student and tutor'.

This novel way of sharing knowledge and opinion prompted one tutor to reflect that

a number of factors militated against the emergence of productive dialogue at an early stage:

- a tension between a culture of competition and an ethos of collaboration; and
- a tendency among some students to remain inconspicuously in the shadows, intimidated by the prospect of providing a permanent reminder of their thinking.

A student expressed this reservation cogently:

When we are writing it feels that we are more under the microscope, that it's going to be evaluated. If you say something wrong, you are embarrassed but it's still there. So there's a learning process for the student in putting things up on the board. There is still a barrier there between writing something and saying something.

A main concern for a tutor in a further, level three, course, in which students used face-to-face and online methods to produce group reports, was that 'There seems to be resistance to sharing ideas about a course beyond the seminar room'. She felt that the collaborative facilities 'were used more for sharing information than for debate', and that 'students debated only when prompted and then reluctantly'. Such reluctance was expressed by a female student, who noted that 'at the start we were not sure how we were supposed to interact' in the online environment. This comment underlines how important it is that the objectives of both the course and discourse are reiterated and understood by individuals other than the tutor. The initial response of many students was to use the online space in the same way as they would a seminar. At every site there were participants who felt compelled to address the tutor online rather than colleagues in their own groups, and to offer what they thought the tutor wanted to see.

*Hall: Forging a Learning Community?**Learning spaces and tasks*

Moving beyond a minimalist engagement in collaborative work requires the creation of meaningful learning spaces and tasks. Learning spaces are open contexts where students can engage with peers and resources in the context of specific learning activities, such as in a web-based discussion forum. However, their effectiveness depends upon how they are integrated into the broader learning and teaching fabric of a course (the other learning spaces), and how their use is managed.

The tutor of the level two course referred to earlier noted that 475 email messages were posted, either within the four 'private' student groups or on the main bulletin board (available to all) during the six weeks the students were engaged in task work. He noted clear benefits to student learning as the course progressed, and a student focus-group analysis highlighted the course's affective cultural power in creating an on-going opportunity for all learners to interact, engage, and critique. What impressed the tutor was the 'value they attached to collaborative strategies'. As one female student remarked: 'I found it helpful to read other peoples' views. Although I had my own, I could look at theirs and see where they were coming from and relate that back to the text and find a different way to look at it.' The space and methods of involvement that the tutor encouraged allowed the students to forge their own communities of practice, which worked beyond token involvement towards the higher rungs of Anstein's ladder of participation: that is, towards partnership and delegated power. Several key elements were involved in forming and sustaining this community.

Firstly, the emphasis that was placed on collaboration from the first session onwards was seen as meaningful because directly linked to task work, learning outcomes and assessment. Secondly, the fact that a virtual learning environment was used allowed pastoral support to be linked to learning tasks and materials. This site was permanently available, which enabled a commonly held view of collective and individual goals to be kept always in mind and facilitated the relationship between online and face-to-face study. As the tutor remarked, 'This meant that seminars were invested with a greater immediacy, a clarity of purpose and relevance to the learning needs of students.' The course formed a more seamless whole. Thirdly, the fact that the students were aware of the tutor's commitment to the changed design and delivery of the course gave them a sense of security and helped build up trust. Emphasizing the positive-sum aspect of this, one male student particularly valued the level of feedback available, arguing that 'The tutor's responses to the bulletins has given people a lot more confidence and caused them to think a lot more deeply than they would have in the normal lecture and seminar'. As the course

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progressed, the tutor took a less central role, intervening only when particular groups requested it or when the task required it. Clearly, within the context of this small-scale class, there was the space, commitment and understanding to develop partnership and a community of practice.

At two other project sites, however, there was confusion amongst learners about the relationship between the web-based innovations and the nature of their own learning. When they were asked before two separate level two implementations whether they thought that the enhanced use of communications technology would influence the way they learned, only three out of 48 students referred to the power of discussion to affect learning. Only four students believed that dialogue with their peers or the course tutor was an effective learning strategy, despite the fact that 42 of them claimed they valued the interactions that seminars offer. The post-implementation questionnaire answers emphasized the individualistic nature of the learning and teaching cultures of these courses, and the extent to which the innovation was viewed as a bolt-on imposition. Whilst 26 learners thought that the web-based course materials made a positive difference to their course, all except three agreed that the materials were just another way of analysing source material that could equally well be examined in traditional ways.

At the first of these sites, materials were supplied as extra resources, with the innovation affecting delivery style rather than course design. The online learning space provided was not explicitly linked to task work or assessment. The main learning elements were information gathering as a precursor to the achievement of the assessment criteria (in two summative essays, one source-critique and an exam). One student believed that learning 'should be about us having to find out, rather than logging on to a computer to find out what someone has put there ready for us'. At the second site, a dedicated website had been developed that integrated pastoral support, learning materials and assessments. However, while the students could articulate the benefits of computer-enhanced learning in terms of the freedom it offered for independent thought, coupled with the ability to negotiate with other students and the tutor, they did not appear to view these benefits with great enthusiasm. The tutor felt that 'no student went beyond the minimum that was required of them'. As one student put it when asked how he coped with the curriculum innovation: '[I had] no problems; but why should we have to do it?'

Both courses demanded a style of study for which these level two undergraduates appeared unprepared. One student commented that the computer is 'good for accessing information but it is no substitute for having a good teacher and a good atmosphere in the class'. The educational innovation altered the learning and teaching culture of the course, but the overall lack of alignment between the web- and peer-enabled learning process, and forms of

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assessment, left the students disconcerted about the value of the innovation. The learning tasks did not relate to the assessment, and the learning spaces that were created did not support the main delivery mechanisms of the course.

Elsewhere, and in larger student groups, shared involvement began to develop when the course objectives were aligned to the departmental context of the programme of study and overall learning outcomes. At one institution, a total of 350 undergraduates at first level and 40 at second and third levels participated in web-based implementations within the Honours programme in History, in four modules over two years. Development of specific websites that acted as points of reference and launch-pads for learning, teaching and assessment enabled tutors to work towards integrating students in a learning community. The approach stemmed from a collectively-produced, departmental implementation plan, and the students were introduced in small groups to the websites and allied tasks by the teachers working in teams. An important theme in the department's rationale for the innovation was securing the confidence of level one students. A tutor noted that 'increasing numbers and more flexible degree programmes have led to fewer points of contact between students within and outside classes'. Post-course student evaluation had highlighted the fact 'that face-to-face contact *and* increased electronic communications between staff and students alongside regular meetings with their peer group are equally necessary for first-level students who can easily feel lost and disoriented'.

Clearly, the aim here was to empower students by keeping them in touch with the course and others through both contact and non-contact means. The team approach encouraged the students to evaluate the website regularly and post new materials, information and thoughts, which provided them with a collaborative frame-of-reference. The Dean of the department recognized the importance of this innovative, collaborative approach, adding that 'analysis of student feedback to date reveals a generally favourable response' by both students and staff. The opportunity for staff to share exemplar materials, and for shared feedback among staff and students, added vitality to the department's involvement and encouraged development of the community of practice. The programme ethos was not explicitly non-zero-sum, but the process of collaborative innovation engendered a win-win approach that promoted inclusion and engagement through partnership.

the foundations of a community of learning

In a number of these courses, then, students were empowered, to different degrees, through: inclusive and appropriate induction; communication and reinforcement of shared values; use of ICTs with their potential to deliver

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collaborative learning opportunities; and, clear statement of the value of working as a learning community for individual development. These elements helped shape an understanding that course learning outcomes could be achieved through shared approaches, and, importantly, that this process would be enjoyable. By contrast, where traditional ways of working and learning were indicated, through the bolt-on nature of the educational innovation and the assessment criteria, attempts at collaborative approaches floundered. In these cases, the win-lose logic of the educational approach was emphasized because collaborative working was never made explicit and was not valued. One tutor stated that the 'competitive nature of the grades market' militated against co-operation. To promote non-zero, or co-operative, motivations, requires culture change: re-conceptualizing education as a partnership and engaging student involvement to that end.

In order to forge a partnership between tutor and students, and to discourage students from expecting the tutor to provide all the information and expertise, the opening sessions of each course were crucial. Where tutors negotiated the way the course would function, and articulated how the technology and collaborative approaches would enhance achievement of the learning outcomes, the students moved towards a different mindset. As one tutor noted: 'Undoubtedly, the attitude of the lecturer/tutor introducing materials will influence students' willingness to engage with the material and potentially shape the student experience of a specific course.' Thus, successful educational innovation requires consultation that moves beyond therapy and information towards a shared sense of why the innovation matters. Equally, an inclusive and empowering educational experience for students requires partnership. A degree can be seen as a finite project situated within a new environment that has a particular culture, into which individuals are initiated and socialized. Any fragmentation of institutional approach will tend to place stress on the learner. For example, one institution failed to provide sufficient technical support for the innovation. A third-year student was particularly critical, saying that the Information Services staff 'spoke in a language I couldn't understand and phone links to them rarely worked'. Here, there was a clear need for a more cohesive and collaborative approach to curriculum delivery by the institution as a whole.

The attitudes of all participants in the learning process are crucial. Anstein's and Wenger's approaches to engagement both posit that meaningful collaboration requires teamwork, underpinned by individual motivation, participation and trust, values which must be internalized by all concerned. And the evidence of the *Chic* project is that the learning attitudes, spaces and tasks developed all impact upon individual motivation to engage in a learning community. The individual's trust must be developed within a group environment. In pragmatic

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terms, this means that the individual needs to see collaboration with others as 'added value' (to see 'what's in it for me'). A Dean commented that collaborative learning developments 'must be connected to the full range of teaching, learning and curriculum approaches'. To be meaningful, such connectivity depends upon congruence with departmental and institutional values so that mixed messages are not sent within or across courses.

One of the best ways of disseminating an institutional/departmental mission, or communicating its ethos, is through a website. Not only do sites offer the opportunity to engage the learner on every rung of Anstein's ladder, they also offer a means to discuss and develop a shared conception of learning and teaching at programme level. Among the many *Chic* project sites there was no coherent, succinct articulation of such a mission or culture. Rather, the sites were used to disseminate information about courses, programme specifications and the staff and their research or teaching interests. In just four cases was a distinct learning and teaching ethos discussed in any depth, and only once was this located within two mouse-clicks of the home page. Another five sites briefly mentioned learning and teaching styles, but the final five made no mention of learning and teaching at all. Thus a prime opportunity to begin to engage learners from the start was largely lost.

Only two websites positively promoted collaborative or discursive themes within their programmes, one of which made mention of the institution and department existing and working as 'a community'. This site declared that:

We, the History staff, are committed to ensuring that you optimise your time with us and that at the end of the three years you emerge with a degree which in its standards is not only comparable with those of other universities but which also reflects considerable academic progress on your part. We seek to be innovative in our teaching methods including the increasing use of computer assisted learning, to provide pastoral support, to encourage the student History Society and even to risk injury in the annual staff-student football match. <[http://www.uwe.ac.uk/humanities/history/choosing history.shtml](http://www.uwe.ac.uk/humanities/history/choosing%20history.shtml)>

The second site highlighted the need for students to acquire 'an historical culture' within a supportive environment, but did not describe or analyse what this might mean <<http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/acadepts/humarts/history/index.htm>>. On most sites much of the language used was descriptive and informative, with no mention made of partnership or collaboration.

Clearly, this issue of the language used by institutions and departments in websites, learning spaces and processes of induction is an important one. Effective support of learning and engagement requires connection to be made with the learner's prior experience and beliefs. Equally, such communication must help the participants to negotiate and develop shared community norms. As a result, empowering and collaborative partnerships may form, and delegation of power to the students can be maximized.

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c o n c l u s i o n

Personal stories, shared understandings, socialization, rituals, and reflection – the kind of involvement that enables individuals to develop their values and beliefs in the context of what they experience and see around them. By the same token, if students are to move beyond the lower rungs of Anstein's ladder of participation in higher education, they need to be entrusted with the power to comment on cultures and events, and to help alter them. A pragmatic approach to collaborative working implies restructuring our existing practices in order to engage learners and tutors throughout programmes of study: using face-to-face and online communication spaces to socialize students, to enable them to develop their own identities as learners, and to reflect on their relationships to knowledge, others, and the world in which they live. This means working in non-zero-sum partnerships with students, valuing their non-academic experiences, emphasizing the co-operative elements of degree programmes, and their win-win possibilities, from the outset.

In order meaningfully to value student experiences and inputs to the learning process, departmental websites must articulate shared expectations and needs. This can be done in part through the addition of student testimonials and discussion areas for departmental-level or programme-level news. But to enhance the role of the learner within our institutions we must go further than that. Students need to be involved in every aspect of departmental strategy, so that the departments may offer the engaging contexts Wenger describes: communities of practice. However, as a caveat to this view, some would ask: to what extent can students who are based at an institution for an average of three years, and who bring with them a variety of experience and beliefs, contribute to the formation of departmental cultures and agendas? Is this something that higher education should facilitate? If the answer is yes, then helping to create a positive individual and group identity is a key to success.

Pragmatically, this will involve: including students in the process of induction to a course, and using this to define the departmental/course culture; using the strengths of virtual learning environments, defining them as shared community-portals; involving students in course design processes in order to engage them in the task of aligning learning, teaching and assessment; realistically examining whether available delivery mechanisms are deployed effectively; analysing the roles and requirements of assessment. By including students in responsibility for all these aspects of the curriculum, even devolving such responsibility where appropriate, we can more fully engage them within experienced, mature communities of practice.

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note

1. From this point on, all the quotations that relate to the *Chic* project are taken either from unpublished reports and case studies available on the project web site (<http://chic.tees.ac.uk/pages/deliv.htm>) or directly from staff and student evaluation data.

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biographical note

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